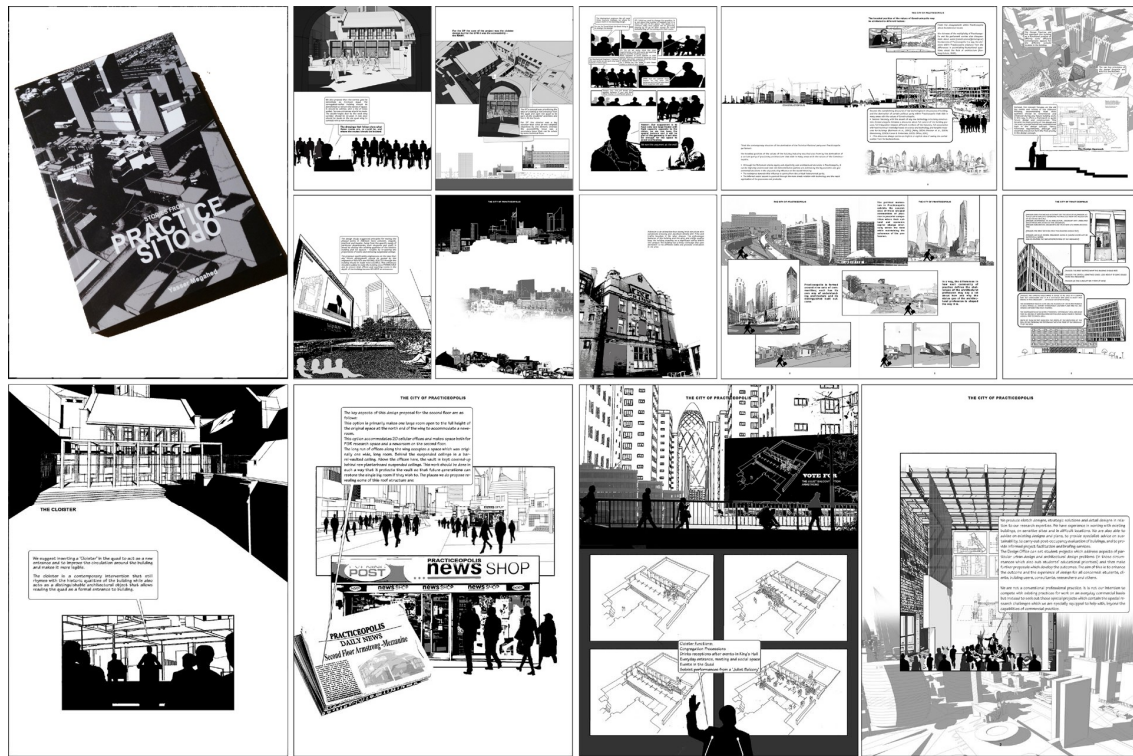


PRACTICEOPOLIS: Stories from the Architectural Profession

Yasser Megahed

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1972-5429>



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Book Brief

With the increasing specialisation in the process of contemporary building production, the value and the role of architects have come into question in construction discourse. From literature about architects losing leadership position in the industry to others arguing that architects must follow the more specialised members of the building team, this book is illustrating the architects' point of view in this debate, showing one important dimension of the story of building construction. The book is a story about the contemporary architectural profession, in which it acts as the protagonist in the form of an imaginary city called *Practiceopolis*. Practiceopolis is a fictive city-state, located within a union of states representing different members in the construction domain that together form 'Constructopolis—the Confederation of the Building Industry'. The novel narrates quasi-realistic stories that exaggerate the architectural 'everyday' and the tacit, in order to make it prominent and tangible. They depict and dramatise the value conflicts between the different cultures of practising architecture and between the architectural profession and other members of the building industry as political conflicts occurring around the future of Practiceopolis. The book uses this metaphorical world to examine different ideologies at work among architects and other members of the construction industry and provoke questions about the largely tacit assumptions which inform them. The novel ends in the tradition of dystopian worlds common in a certain strand of graphic novels with near-future speculation that extrapolates present contemporary conditions to warn against a substantial change to the architectural profession.

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PROLOGUE

Notes on the Contemporary Architectural Profession—The Status Quo

This introductory essay sets the overall of the book, its structure, and approach. The essay comes across the architectural profession's position in the contemporary building industry and the current landscape of the architectural profession. It brings forward how the dominance of the values of what may be called the technical-rational culture of practice has become a fait accompli for the contemporary architectural profession. It shows how these values have become gradually the norm, the default, and both the expected and accepted way of practicing architecture, where any other mode of practice became the exception. It shows how this has consequently created a supposed authority of its worldview over the whole architectural profession, which in turn, has resulted in greater dominance over the profession, giving this culture of practice the lead in influencing the future trajectory of the architectural profession.

01 THE CITY OF PRACTICEOPOLIS

This part of the novel sets up the metaphor of Practiceopolis: the city of the architectural profession. It features the social, cultural and political structure of the city. This section narrates excerpts from the history of Practiceopolis. It tells key shifts in the canonical (Western) history of architecture through a story of a historical power struggle between the protagonists of different cultures of architectural practice and shows how this development resulted in shaping contemporary Practiceopolis. It comes across architects' efforts to seek social distinction from other building trades, the first incarnations of the independent city of architecture, the dilemma of architectural styles in the 19th century and its moral dimension, the 20th Modernist revolution and ending with the formation of contemporary Practiceopolis.

02: STORIES FROM PRACTICEOPOLIS: THE ATKINSON STORY

The second part of the novel re-stages a set of quasi-realistic stories from the author's own construction experience into the fictional terrain of Practiceopolis. These stories dramatise real-life exchanges from project management meetings held during the delivery of a live architectural project in the UK, re-siting those exchanges to an imaginary city as high-stakes public debates. This part reflects upon the debates that occurred during the project's Progress and Value Engineering Meetings highlighting the presence of multiple and different cultures of practice represented by concept architects; facility management services; engineering consultants; contractors; quantity surveyors; and a multinational project manager. This part re-sits those exchanges to the imaginary city of Practiceopolis, dramatising them as political conflicts between the various cultures of practice, all working to articulate competing visions for the future of the city. The stories reflect upon certain priorities of architectural discourse, and the legacies of architectural training within the complex conditions of the globalized building industry.

The Proposal

The sub-sections of this part feature descriptions of the characters involved in the project, the history of the building, the commission and the design proposed for the building renovation. The novel describes the reflexive position of the author who also acts one of the stories main protagonists. It situates the author's architectural and academic baggage and illustrating the backstory of the novel in which the author was a participant observer. As a blend of auto-ethnographic observations and design fiction, it illustrates everyday events from practice, examining through them ideologies at work among architects and other members of the construction industry.

The Clashes

The Clashes section of the story of Atkinson features different stories that revolve around design and technical issues which occurred during the project's development; each portraying the coexistence of different values at work in its execution. The stories cover some details about everyday experiences of the contemporary building process, depicting value-conflicts in the architectural profession and also reflecting upon the extension of these value-conflicts to the broader scope of the building industry. They provoke big questions about everyday routines in the profession that practitioners may take-for-granted, reflecting on the largely tacit assumptions which inform these routines. The various stories act as an auto-ethnographical 'reflective practice' exercise that involves self-analysing personal experiences and through them paying critical attention to practical values and theories that inform everyday actions. They allow the examination of practice reflectively and reflexively in order to extract wider lessons from them for the self-definition of the architectural profession. Through these stories about this project, inner conversations of the building process are represented, interpreted, exaggerated and dramatised to illustrate what can be characterized as disputes and opposing worldviews manifest in the contemporary building industry.

The Debate in Practiceopolis Parliament

The concluding part of the novel places the various value conflicts of the Atkinson project and situates them in a fictional debate at Practiceopolis Parliament. It depicts this conflict as a political debate around the future of Practiceopolis. This part deploys the method of 'dialectical discourse' to demonstrate value conflicts that appeared between prominent cultures of practice in the architectural profession and proposes the argument between them as somewhat polarised. Dialectic discourse is employed in this part to help understand the divergent positions of the multiple, prominent cultures of practice, their value assumptions, their points of dis/agreement and uncover a side of the underlying politics behind everyday occurrences in the architectural professional practice. This part identifies the danger of the domination of one mode of practice and the strict attachment to technological processes, which could result in influential changes to the foundations of the architectural profession. It pessimistically ends with a near future speculation, extrapolating from present contemporary conditions conveyed in the novel. It shows the end of the architectural profession, or its change to a new profession, as a domesticated subsection of one of the technical-rational members of the industry as a warning against subsuming distinctive values of the architectural profession under those of the building industry.

EPILOGUE

The final part of the book is a reflection on the graphic novel and its ending. It draws out longer conclusion about the shape of future of the contemporary architectural practice and shows how the current status quo of the architectural profession may indicate some different scenarios about its future trajectory. One scenario is pessimistic – which the novel concluded with - depicting the end of the historical legacy of the architectural profession and its rhetorical repertoire under a technical-rational autocracy. A second scenario is offered around a techno-rational 'utopia' where integration and coordination, timely delivery, and elimination of errors would be achieved through technical development. The epilogue raises questions about the possibility of other futures that may acknowledge an anticipated technical-rational future for the profession but calls for a new mind-set that celebrates, communicates, and markets the unique values of the architectural profession as a cultural and economic asset indispensable to the improvement of the built environment. Finally, the epilogue ends with reflections on graphic novels as a means for rigorous investigations in architecture. It reflects upon the process of translating practice-based research in architecture by means of 'thinking through fiction' or 'Design Fiction', storytelling and cartoons.